Our War Ambassador at St. James's

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action and a far better knowledge of how to live on terms of cooperative friendliness with his fellow men.

In a brief article of this kind it is impossible to give even a summary of Walter Page's ambassadorial career. All that can be said is that the story related by himself in his own intimate and private letters, which have been woven into a coherent narrative with skill, appreciation and good taste by his biographer, Mr. Burton Hendrick, makes delightful reading. Not only that, his letters shed more light on the perplexing enigma of President Wilson's personality and administration than the most studied and philosophical analysis could possibly do. Woodrow Wilson and Walter Page had been personal friends since their university days. They were both Southerners; they were both members by birth and early association of the Democratic party; they both believed in the political rights of the plain people and that the plain people should be given every opportunity for the best kind of material, intellectual and spiritual development. But Walter Page was never a blind partisan. Only a few weeks before he was appointed Ambassador he wrote to his old friend, Dr. Alderman, president of the University of Virginia:

> I have a new amusement, a new excitement, a new study, as you have, and as we all have who really believe in democracy—a new study, a new hope, and sometimes a new fear; and its name is Wilson . . . I didn't suppose I'd ever become so interested in a general proposition or in a governmental hope . . . Will he do it? Can he do it? Can anybody do it? How can we help him do it? Now that the task is on him, does he really understand? Do I understand him, and he me? There is a certain unreality about it. The man himself—I find that nobody quite knows him now. Alas! I wonder if he quite knows himself! Temperamentally very shy, having lived too much alone and far too much with women (how I wish two of his daughters were sons!) this Big Thing having descended upon him before he knew, or was quite prepared for it, thrown into a whirl of self-seeking men, even while he is trying to think out the duties that press, knowing the necessity of silence, surrounded by small people—well, I made up my mind that his real friends owed it to him and to what we all hope for, to break over his reserve and to volunteer help.

This is what Page tried to do as Ambassador, and the tragedy of it all is that even the authority and prestige of his Ambassador position, added to the authority of an old friendship, did not save his efforts to help the President from being unsuccessful. As his letters from London to friends and even to the State Department go on during the years of the war practically their only complaint—for Page was an uncomplaining man with a delightful sense of humor—was that he could not get a response from the President or from the State Department.

IV.

In the autumn of 1916 Ambassador Page visited Washington to report to the President personally the progress of the war and the dangers which threatened the United States. He has left a memorandum of this visit, which will be found on page 171 of the biography, that probably without conscious intention is a searching condemnation of the "lamentable failure of the President really to lead the nation." But in the most hopeless and discouraging situation that any Ambassador ever found himself, believing that the democratic institutions which were to him a kind of religion were in imminent danger of destruction, Page, sick at heart, went on painfully doing his duty—"waging neutrality," as he called it. He was scrupulously correct in all his official actions while this country was still neutral. "Neutrality!" he once exclaimed. "There is nothing in the world so neutral as this embassy. Neutrality takes up all our time." But in a private letter to his brother he expressed the deepest feeling of his heart. "Neutrality is a quality of government—an artificial unit. When a war comes a government must go in it or stay out of it. It must make a declaration to the world of its attitude. That's all that neutrality is. A government can be neutral, but no *man* can be."

During this distressful period of neutrality he performed one act of statesmanship which deserves to be remembered as one of the great diplomatic episodes of all time, but which is in danger of being overlooked because of the very lightness and deftness of Page's touch and because of the very simple and deep-lying humor in which he performed the great task. In 1915 the tension between Great Britain and the United States was very acute because of the seizure by Great Britain of neutral ships and their contraband cargoes. Congress passed a law permitting foreign built ships to be purchased by American citizens and to fly the American flag. The story is worth telling, as Page's biographer relates it:

> The *Dacia*, a merchantman of the Hamburg-American Line, had been lying at her wharf in Port Arthur, Tex., since the outbreak of the war. In early January, 1915, she was purchased by E. N. Breitung, of Marquette, Mich. Mr. Breitung caused great excitement when he announced that he had placed the *Dacia* under American registry according to the terms of this new law, had put upon her an American crew, and that he proposed to load her with cotton and sail for Germany. The crisis had now arisen which the well-wishers of Great Britain and the United States had so dreaded. Great Britain's position was a difficult one. If it acquiesced, the way would be opened for placing under American registry all the German and Austrian ships that were then lying unoccupied in American ports and using them in trade between the United States and the Central Powers. If Great Britain seized the *Dacia*, then there was the likelihood that this would embroil her with the American Government—and this would serve German purposes quite as well. . . .
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> When the *Dacia* sailed on January 23 the excitement was keen; the eyes of the world were fixed upon her. German sympathizers attributed the attitude of the American Government in permitting the vessel to sail as a "dare" to Great Britain, and the fact that Great Britain had announced her intention of taking up this "dare" made the situation still more tense.
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> When matters had reached this pass Page one day dropped into the Foreign Office.
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> "Have you ever heard of the British fleet, Sir Edward?" he asked.
>
> Grey admitted that he had, though the question obviously puzzled him.
>
> "Yes," Page went on musingly. "We've all heard of the British fleet. Perhaps we have heard too much about it. Don't you think it's had too much advertising?"
>
> The Foreign Secretary looked at Page with an expression that implied a lack of confidence in his sanity.
>
> "But have you ever heard of the French fleet?" the American went on. "France has a fleet too, I believe."
>
> Sir Edward granted that.
>
> "Don't you think that the French fleet ought to have a little advertising?"
>
> "What on earth are you talking about?"
>
> "Well," said Page, "there's the *Dacia*. Why not let the French fleet seize it and get some advertising?"
>
> A gleam of understanding immediately shot across Grey's face. The old familiar twinkle came into his eye.
>
> "Yes," he said, "why not let the Belgian royal yacht seize it?"
>
> This suggestion from Page was one of the great inspirations of the war. It amounted to little less than genius. By this time Washington was pretty wearied of the *Dacia*, for mature consideration had convinced the Department that Great Britain had the right on its side . . . To ignore the capture of this ship by the British would have brought all this hullabaloo again about the ears of the Administration. But the position of France is entirely different; the memories of Lafayette and Rochambeau still exercise a profound spell on the American minds. . . . Page knew that if the British seized the *Dacia* the cry would go up in certain quarters for immediate war, but that if France committed the same crime the guns of the adversary would be spiked. It was purely a case of sentiment and "psychology." And so the event proved. His suggestion was at once acted on: a French cruiser went out into the Channel, seized the offending ship, took it into port, where a French prize court promptly condemned it. The proceeding did not cause even a ripple of hostility.

V.

The impression should not be given, however, that the biography is merely a historical document revealing inside secrets of the war. It is much more than that. It is a human document revealing with the greatest frankness the workings of the heart and mind of a man who loved and believed in life, and life more abundant.

After Walter Page's death President Alderman of the University of Virginia, in a memorial service, asserted his belief that when Page's correspondence came to be published he would be found to be one of the great letter writers of his time, if not of all time. Mr. Hendrick's biography justifies this prediction.

Page was essentially a literary man; that is to say, he believed that literature is the expression of life. He was familiar with poetry and prose of both ancient and modern times. But he was very far from a highbrow. He wrote in terse and pulsating English that lives, and moves, and breathes. He was not afraid of metaphors taken from common life or even of slang phrases when they expressed his meaning. To his old publishing and editorial colleagues he wrote:

> I don't mind telling you (nobody else) that the more I see just how great statesmen work and manage great governments—the more I see of them at close range—whether in Washington or London or Berlin or Vienna or Constantinople (for these are my Capitals), the more I admire the methods of the Long Island farmers. Boys, I swear I could take our crowd and do a better job than many of these great men do . . . Of course everybody's worked to death. But something else ails a lot of 'em all the way from Constantinople to London. Leaving out common gutter lying (and there's much of it), the sheer stupidity of Governments is amazing. They are all so human, so mighty human. I wouldn't be a Government for any earthly consideration. I'd rather be a brindle dog and trot under the wagon.

Yet his spirit was not captious or critical or self-laudatory. He speaks of himself somewhere as a "greenhorn picked off the plain of Long Island," and in another letter, referring to the problems and work of the embassy during the neutrality period, he indulges in this demurrer:

> So far as I know, we've done fairly well; but always in proportion to silence. I don't want any publicity. I don't want any glory. I don't want any office. I don't want nothin'—but to do this job squarely, to get out of this scrape, to go off somewhere in the sunshine and to see if I can slip back into my old self and see the world sane again. Yet I'm immensely proud that I have had the chance to do some good—to keep our record straight—as far as I can, and to be of what service I can to these heroic people.

A delightful letter to his year old grandson is quite comparable to the immortal letters of Theodore Roosevelt to his children. Indeed, one cannot help wondering what extraordinary epistolary literature might have been produced if Theodore Roosevelt had been President in Washington and Walter Page Ambassador in London during the period of the war. How they would have rejoiced each other's hearts by comments, criticisms and commendations on human frailties and human virtues, punctuated by occasional explosions of uproarious laughter!

Walter Page died before he reached his 64th birthday, killed in the war as much as if he had been the victim of a German shell in a trench on the Western front. His countrymen respected him, but did not know him as well as they knew some of the other great civilian figures of the conflict—Cardinal Mercier, for example. This book will reveal to American readers that they had a representative near the fighting front who loved human liberty and the divine rights of man as deeply as did the great Cardinal.